

Detroit residents denounce library closures

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Scores of local residents packed the Chase branch library in northwest Detroit Wednesday afternoon to confront members of the Library Commission over threatened library closures in the city. The Chase branch and five others face the axe due to budget cuts.

Library administrators claim that layoffs earlier this year have stretched their staff too thin to manage the current 23 branches. In addition to the Chase the other branches targeted for closure are: Chandler Park, Lincoln, Mark Twain Annex, Monteith and Richard.

Neighborhood residents have collected hundreds of signatures on a petition asking that the Chase branch be kept open. Library supporters picketed the library last week and held another picket downtown on Tuesday in front of the main branch of the Detroit library.

Peggy Noble, president the Fenmore Block Association who chaired the Wednesday meeting, said members of the Library Commission had come to explain why the Chase branch had been put on the list for closure.

Commission member Russell Bellant said finances for the library, which is supported by property tax revenues, have been eroding steadily for the past several years due to the economic crisis. He said the system, which laid-off 82 library workers in the spring, is stretched beyond its limits in terms of staffing.

Bellant raised the specter of a possible takeover of the Detroit Public Libraries by an emergency financial manager appointed by the governor if budgetary issues aren't resolved. A recent bill passed by the Michigan legislature gives Republican Governor Rick Snyder broad powers to remove local officials in the event of a fiscal crisis.

Many neighborhood residents expressed dismay and asked how the commissioners could take an action that would have such a detrimental impact, particularly on children. Several asked if the commission had considered a special tax or other measures such as bond sales to raise additional funds.

An administrator answered that while the commission was looking for additional revenue, any new taxes

required authorization from the state legislature. She said efforts to sell bonds had failed, because the library's credit rating was too low.

In reply, Keena Benning, a neighborhood resident said, "You say the credit rating is too low to sell bonds. It's a Catch-22. You need libraries in urban areas with poorer people who lack computers and books. But it seems the poorest people get the most crap dumped on them. Its unfair."

Another resident declared angrily, "They are talking about closing the local post office. Now they are closing this library. This is devastating for every one of us. It seems like something has to be done. I want to fight for this library."

Lawrence Porter, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party and the Chairman of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS) also spoke. Addressing the residents, he said, "We don't accept that there is no money. They are kicking 12,000 families off welfare, cutting unemployment benefits and shutting down schools. All this, they say, is because there is no money."

He said the Bush and Obama administrations "had bailed out the banks to the tune of \$23 trillion." The federal government, he continued, "has given loans to General Motors and other large corporations that are now sitting on \$2 trillion in cash. But the corporations are not hiring people because they want to keep unemployment high so wages remain low. This is their policy.

"The state government cut 40 percent of the funding for the libraries. They have been giving tax abatements to corporations for years. If they wanted another casino or sports stadium, they would find the money.

"One person called the shutting down of libraries a form of 'cultural genocide.' They have always been the intellectual center of a neighborhood. Today they are more necessary than ever. If you want to apply for a job, you need the library to get on the Internet."

Porter concluded by calling on residents to go out and mobilize support in the working class to fight the closing of the libraries. "We say call back those 80 laid off people

so we can have libraries in every part of the city.”

In reply one commission member said the American Library Association had enquired about money targeted for school libraries in the Obama administrations jobs bill, but had been told specifically by the White House that it excluded support for public libraries. “The commitment for public libraries is falling off from all public officials,” he said.

Toward the end of the meeting several young people joined the discussion. Ryan Hinkle, a student at Crossroads Ferndale Adult Education Alternative School said, “I know pretty much every librarian here. Learning through a computer is not the same as learning through books. If this library closes a lot of kids will be on the streets. This branch is very important to the kids in the community. There are only a few left because of the budget cuts. I like this library; they treat you like one of the family. It is a safe haven.”

Tamika Monroe, an unemployed worker from the neighborhood, attended the meeting with her daughter Joy. She told the WSWs, “I have been in this neighborhood since 1997. We are against closing the library. It is more than a place to get books. I am here two to three times a week to do a job search; to put in resumes and email companies.

“It has allowed my daughter and me to bond more. We started a movie night at home. We come here to check out movies. We check out games, we use the computers and they have field trips. We exhaust every resource they have. One of the librarians helped me with a computer program I was not familiar with.

“Closing the library will mean we have to go all the way to Redford. This one is just around the corner. There are lots of children here; they are not going to be able to get the things they need. A lot of them do not have computers at home.”



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